
Individuals who find themselves trapped by dramatic events often tell compelling stories about their personal experiences. Their stories can provide a unique lens through which to contextualize important events in modern history. Filled with tears, heartbreak, and drama, Lian Xi’s *Blood Letters* is an extraordinary account of Lin Zhao (林昭 1932–1968), a female progressive Christian and Communist activist, who joined the socialist revolution during the 1940s but who ended up as an enemy of the Maoist state. Lian narrates the life story of Lin Zhao, who attended the Methodist-run Laura Haygood Memorial School for Girls in Suzhou before 1949, and after the Communist Revolution, participated enthusiastically in the local land reform campaign. As a journalism major at Peking University, Lin wound up on the wrong side of the political purge during the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1957) and was labeled as a rightist. In 1960, she was arrested for publishing an underground magazine critical of the Maoist regime. It was during the imprisonment that her Christian faith sustained her through endless interrogation sessions. Before her execution, she left behind many poems, family letters and essays—some written in her blood—that throw light on the complexities of faith and politics.

Central to Lian’s investigation are questions about how an ordinary believer such as Lin Zhao reacted to Maoism critically and came to grips with the traumatizing experience of incarceration as part of a broader spiritual and political struggle, and how China today should make sense of her story to explore faith and agency in an increasingly hostile environment. A closer look at Lin Zhao’s tragedy enables us to capture faith-based resistance at an individual level, and to contextualize the particularities of each persecution in modern China.

Thematically, there are three major takeaways from this book. The first is the complexity of memory production in China. Biography (or autobiography) is a major mode of constructing historical memory. This literary genre dates back to early imperial times as a way to promote state-sanctioned Confucian values through exceptional role models. With the rise of nationalism inherent in the May Fourth Movement
(1919), modern intellectuals used this genre to attach the individual self to the collective national body. This was exactly what Hu Shi called the “little self” under the “big self.”

Driven by the fever of nationalism and the need for mass mobilization, both the Republican and Maoist regimes deliberately mythicized historical figures in order to submit the autonomous self to the collective national body. The Maoist government went further by subordinating the autonomous self to state mobilization. The best example was the telling of the Lei Feng story, which represented the concerted effort by the Communist authorities to promote absolute loyalty and altruistic sacrifice among citizens during the 1960s.

The Reform Era, however, saw a flood of personal memoirs recalling persecution and hardship suffered during the Cultural Revolution, including Rae Yang’s reflection on her experience as a Red Guard and Harry Wu’s moving account of his suffering in a labor camp. These memoirs provided an outlet for healing psychological scars associated with traumatic turmoil. With a similar emphasis on trauma, the stories of Christian political prisoners, such as Lin Zhao’s, reveal both the lived experience of individual believers and their ongoing struggles with a totalitarian state. Thus, Chinese Christians are determined to reclaim alternative histories long submerged under the dominant official Communist historiography of Western imperialism.

The account of religious persecution and martyrdom entered the Chinese Church’s hagiography, providing Christians with a shared cultural resource that transcended denominational and theological differences. These hagiographical writings, however, which are aimed at churches critical of Communist religious policy, are highly problematic because they emphasize the saintly character of these faith leaders without addressing the larger context in which they interacted with the Maoist government. Such romantic representations, often constructed in a strong rhetoric that expresses the hope of martyrdom, are reminiscent of the heroic stories of Communist revolutionaries, sharing a pro-

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gressive linear narrative. By subscribing to the same narrative model of linear progression, Chinese Christian leaders participate in their own mythmaking. When they interpret the memory of prison ordeals, they transform it from a period of bitter suffering and hardship into a unique experience of survival and try to extract theological insights for faith consolidation. The latest research by Chloë Starr highlights an affinity between these Christian narratives of saints and Communist heroic stories.

From this perspective, Lian sets a new template for Chinese church historians to delve into the traumatic past in order to problematize the role of a patriotic Christian in a socialist state. Drawing on Lin Zhao’s own words, Lian begins each chapter with an overview of major socio-political controversies in China and sets the stage for the narrative. This approach places Lin Zhao’s story within the wider context of domestic and international politics, as well as within the development of Christianity in China. He writes clearly and fluently, giving those unfamiliar with contemporary China a sense of its shape, dynamics, and change. Amply illustrated by just a few black and white photos, he succinctly captures the pain and suffering at different stages of Lin’s young life. We follow Lin Zhao as she grew up in a well-educated Chinese family, received a prestigious Protestant mission education in Suzhou, and joined the Communist resistance movement. We become more engaged in the story as Lin ended up as a political prisoner from 1960 to 1968. Her religious conviction, commitment to justice, and support from family and friends strengthened her through the years of imprisonment. Through Lin’s remarks, we see the challenges facing political and religious dissidents during the early decades of the People’s Republic. We certainly admire Lin’s courage to adhere to her faith in the most unbearable circumstances and strongly feel that the Chinese government owes her and other dissidents an apology. Although China has not followed in the footsteps of other countries by launching truth and reconciliation commissions that address the painful effects of political upheavals on citizens, this extraordinary book offers a unique perspective on the differences between pluralistic and repressive approaches toward truth-telling.

The second lesson concerns the extension of Christian spiritual sovereignty in modern China. Since the early twentieth century, Chinese

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Christians and foreign missionaries have debated about whether Christianity should be a principle of personal conscience or a motivating force against injustice and corruption. The period of the 1910s and 1920s saw an intense discussion about the privatization of religion, an idea thought to benefit church growth. Many Christians were convinced that in the Republican era, without a state religion or a centralized ideology, there would be an autonomous space for Christianity to grow and thrive. This actually brought the Chinese Church closer to the Western understanding of secular modernity. Yet, this emphasis on the privatization of the religious sphere backfired in the revolutionary upheavals of the mid-1920s, when radical activists and progressive mission school students criticized this otherworldly Christianity for lacking political and social significance. Lin Zhao’s radicalization typified this trend of activism among mission school students. Sheltered by the mission schools against the waves of turbulence, the students often felt lost outside their comfort zone. Radicalization occurred around adolescence. Through mission education, idealistic youths accepted the idea of nationalism and became eager to make their faith relevant to the revolutionary struggle. They regarded their religious calling as important as their civic duty. They saw themselves not simply as ordinary believers, like other Sunday churchgoers, but as God-chosen individuals with a recognizable identity as modernized Chinese believers in quest of a providential destiny. The mission schools provided them with a public space to reconcile faith with citizenship, to explore socialist activism, and to engage in civic and political activities.

Moving away from the exclusive focus on spiritual cultivation, taking up revolutionary activities represented a significant attitudinal change among the mission school students. Christianization and radicalization combined to inspire these students to formulate their political opinions and to pursue activism publicly. Meanwhile, the spread of nationalism provided new opportunities for young Christians to claim political influence. They dropped their long-held distaste for politics and considered revolutionary activism compatible with their sacred calling to serve God and country.

Ironically, the outcome of the socialist revolution turned out to be quite different from what Lin Zhao and other progressive Christians had initially expected. The People’s Republic was far more oppressive

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than previous regimes, as it sought to make the population identify with the state totally. At the other end of identity was the issue of legitimacy: once the populace developed a sense of identification with the single party-state, the latter automatically shored up its legitimacy. For any government to enjoy legitimacy, it should first earn it. In the early 1930s, Luo Longji 羅隆基 and Lin Yutang 林語堂, quoting Edmund Burke, asked how the state could make itself lovable. For the state to be lovable, it should first do something good for the people. For Chinese Christians of all theological stripes, the Maoist state had nothing to offer but trouble. Despite its secular orientation, Maoism displayed many of the trappings of a religion, with a well-developed theology, demanding absolute loyalty from citizens. The Chinese state, as long as it remains Communist and upholds the ideological remnants of Maoism, is reluctant to come to terms with Christianity.

After her disillusionment with Communism in the mid-1950s, Lin Zhao began to attend church services and looked to Christianity for her moral and spiritual conscience. The congregations that she attended in Beijing and Shanghai were the state-controlled Three-Self patriotic institutions, not the old mission churches. Striving to create an autonomous space away from state indoctrination, she used meditation and writing during her imprisonment to prioritize the private intellectual domain over collective ideology. Perhaps we should make a distinction between nation- and state-building in the Maoist decades. What was good for the single party-state was not necessarily good for the nation. Lin Zhao’s persistent resistance actually contributed to the conscientization of the Chinese nation.

The final lesson concerns the everyday form of resistance in China. The autonomy of Lin Zhao was heavily restricted within the state-controlled prison domain. It is worth mentioning that Watchman Nee 倪柝聲, founder of the Christian Assembly (or Little Flock Movement), stayed in the same Tilanqiao 提籃橋 Prison from 1956 to 1969, and Ignatius Pin-mei Kung 龔品梅, the Catholic Bishop of Shanghai, local Little Flock church leaders, and Seventh-day Adventists were there at the same time as Lin Zhao. Charged with the task of remolding Christian political prisoners into new socialist citizens, the Communist prison regime relied on harsh and brutal interrogation

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techniques to reshape prisoners’ religious commitment into an absolute devotion to the state. The Christian prisoners could do nothing to overthrow the regime. Nonetheless, Christian piety instilled a spirit of dissent, giving Lin a theological framework to carve out a limited mental space for spiritual empowerment.

Embracing the practice of contemplative solitude, Lin drew on her fragmentary understanding of Christianity to secure a sacred moment of silence. This faith practice allowed her to reconnect with the Christian God in order to access her inner being. As with the ancient desert fathers and mothers, Lin retreated to this sacred moment and space in order to focus intensely on God. The practice of solitude and contemplative silence embodies a sense of self-denial, surrendering one’s ambitions and welcoming the presence of God to reside in one’s soul. On many occasions, she contextualized her prison ordeal as a spiritual battle. Rejecting socialist values and norms, she embraced biblical teachings and devotional practices such as prayer and hymn singing that she had learned from American Methodist educators. In fact, this Christian upbringing gave her much comfort and solace during the darkest moment of her life. According to Lian,

Lin Zhao put down religious roots during her time at Laura Haywood. As she would discover later in her life, they ran much deeper than she initially realized. The many hymns and biblical verses that she called to mind almost two decades later in her prison cell—which was stripped of all materials except party propaganda—were from her mission school years. They would become the imaginary bricks with which she would build her own chapel in her prison cell for weekly “grand church worship” as she put it.6

The mighty Communist state demolished countless physical churches, but what really sustained the faithful was an invisible spiritual fortress in their hearts and minds. Lin’s experience highlights the characteristics of a historically grounded spirituality that emerged in China as a theology of defiance or a gospel of suffering. She went through an incremental process of appreciating the essence of being a faithful Christian in a time of persecution. This reflected her spiritual transformation through the support she received from her family to-

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ward a more personal relationship with the Christian God, and kept her from abandoning the faith.

In conclusion, this fascinating account of Lin Zhao challenges us to explore new modes of reimagining hopeless situations, without losing sight of the violence of persecution, and to broaden our view of the limited options available to dissidents within China. Even though she had no intention to subvert the single party-state system, her efforts embodied elements of religious defiance, thereby giving us rich ingredients for historical reflection in the early twenty-first century. This explains why the story of Lin Zhao appealed so much to Ding Zilin, founder of the “Tiananmen Mother” pressure group, late Chinese Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo, and today’s human rights lawyers and activists.

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